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ABSTRACT

This historical overview of German studies in Japan, dating from the birth of modern Japan in the 1870's to the present time, includes commentary on the nature and scope of existing language programs. The importance of German idealism--reflected in the philosophy of Kant, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Marx--on Japanese culture is noted. Concluding remarks underscore Japan's eagerness to learn German as well as other languages of international trade. (RL)

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The Role of German in Japan

by Juergen Sang

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Some time ago two Japanese gentlemen, strangers to me, politely introduced themselves in German. They were businessmen on their way back to Tokyo from Los Angeles. They had never been to Germany, nor had they had any business relations with that country. However, they had taken time to view occasionally the National Educational Television Program in Japan. They remembered me as a regular guest on the German language teaching program.

In some way this incident characterizes different aspects of the role German language and culture fulfill in Japan. The elements of the German language are not based so much on economic development as seems to be the case with English, the number one foreign language in Japan. German in Japan has to be seen as an aspect of tradition which does not fully coincide with commercial achievements. Before the birth of modern Japan by the Meiji Restoration of 1869, the nation suffered centuries of power struggles to expel the 'barbars', who had entered the country even before the landing of Perry's ships in Kanagawa in 1854.

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There were many foreign naval forces which gradually won consular rights and established trade missions in Japan. Prussia, in 1861, finally was granted the same rights as the Americans, British, Portuguese, Russians and Dutch had obtained in the harbortowns of Hakodate and Shimoda.[1] Although diplomatic missions of the Shogunat-Government in 1862 also visited Berlin[2], Prussia played a minor role in the battles that led to opening Japan up to the world. Prussia, being engaged in creating a German Empire, fell behind British, French and Dutch efforts in sending military instructors and technicians and not until 1874 did Japan establish an embassy in Berlin. Eager to learn about the secret of the successful foreign infiltration in their country, Japan in those days sent students to America and Europe[3], especially to the Netherlands. English and Dutch soon were being taught in Edo and the foundation of todays' most renowned private universities in Tokyo, as Keiō and Dōshisha reach back to these influences in 1858 and 1864[4].

It was only by chance that the German language became an object of scholarly studies when the famous translator of Dutch medical and diplomatic books Seikei Sugita (1812 - 1859) got the original of a Dutch translation of a book by Wilhelm Hufeland, a German medical doctor. Sugita studied the German text word for word while one of his pupils read the Dutch translation aloud. The private language studies of Sugita and other scholars who learned of

German medical science through their interest in Dutch books elicitated the curiosity of the office of translation 'bakufu' established in 1856.

When in 1860 a Prussian delegation came to Japan to negotiate a trade treaty, the 'bansho-shirabe-dokoro'[5] sent their officer Itsuki Ichikawa (1818 - 1899) to them with a secret mission. While he was there officially to learn to operate the telegraph equipment the Prussians had brought as a gift, he was exclusively interested in the pronounciation of the German language. He must have been successful in his studies since two years later his office opened a German division and Ichikawa became the first Japanese teacher of German, which ranked as third foreign language behind Dutch and English, but ahead of French[6]. Once more luck helped the further development of teaching German in Japan when Hiroyuki Kato (1836-1916), who worked in Ichikawas' division became the first president of the Imperial University of Tokyo. In his autobiography he takes credit for having introduced the study of German at his university, now over hundred years ago. He wrote a book on public law and published it in Germany in 1893, entitled 'Der Kampf ums Recht des Staerkeren und seine Entwicklung'. Katos' German is not rated as flawless. But his thinking was rather progressive and departed from feudalistic and kunfuscianistic ideas, thus reflecting governmental policies to reform the old judicial and administrative systems.[7]

After returning from a diplomatic mission in America and Europe, the representative of the Japanese Emperor, Iwakura, fol-

lowed Bismarcks' advice and within a decade pacified the strong feudalistic opposition and partywarfare against a parliamentarian system under the executive of the Emperor. Governmental committees traveled to Berlin and studied the German Constitution in 1882, which influenced considerably the proclamation of the Japanese Public Code of Law in 1891. Also the parallels between German and Japanese bureaucratism can be traced to such origins. 8)

In 1889 the entire country of Japan was opened to German Nationals, who were now slightly ahead of other European nations and America. 9) With the rise of the German Empire the German cultural heritage found a better reception in Japan and the young Japanese generation began to study in Europe, where German music interested them in particular. The Japanese National Anthem, the 'kimi-ga-yo' was arranged and styled by a German bandmaster in 1873. 10) The number of Japanese music teachers who studied in Germany since those early beginnings today can only be counted in generations. German symphonic music, opera and 'Lied' are nowhere so highly appreciated and performed than in Japan. Where music succeeds the word can not be far behind and in 1885 German philosophy superseded French political and social theories. And when Inoue Tetsujirō returned from Europe he introduced German materialistic thinking to his countrymen. 11) But soon these influences were eliminated by the philosophers of German idealism. Kant, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Marx are, in Japan, still the incarnations of spiritual depth in western thinking and in some aspects related to Buddhism.

The actual knowledge of foreign cultural heritage thus has been achieved by the work of educated people, but was preserved for the use of a social elite. Only they had the time and the skills to translate the foreign literature that interested them. Thus, poets as Goethe, Schiller, Heine, Kleist up to Kafka became known through the dedicated work on them by famous scholars, for example Mori Ōgai.[12] As translating and reading in Japan precede the understanding of foreign books, the university has been the place to cultivate German language. The fact that it was Tokyo University, the nations' most prestigious temple of higher learning where German was particularly taken care of, once credited this foreign language with social standards. To have basic knowledge in German suited every officer in public services.

This generation is still dominant and if English does not work in one of the international hospitals in Tokyo, some German can be helpful.[13] If the doctor then answers fluently in Berlin dialect he perhaps learned it 1920 in Germany and never spoke it again. Even at the office where foreigners have to declare their taxes the officers, having graduated from Tokyo University around 1930, prefer to speak some German rather than English and expect Goethes' or Kants' genius in every German. Graduates of Tokyo University, which was basically organized after the German university model of Wilhelm v. Humboldt, are todays' elite of governmental and business leadership[14] and most of them have reading experience in German, thus demonstrating how the German language made its way quite diffe-

rent from English.

Scholars of reputation in Japan doubt the western wisdom that one has to teach language as spoken element of human communication.[15] Konfucius taught to read the written word silently and knowledge first comes through the eyes of human beings. Students who read and write German fairly well, prove their intellectual ability brilliantly in their mother tongue but are poor in speaking correct German sentences. The western logic for them is not the ultimate key to life and the understanding of foreign cultures. Learning German is a commitment not only to social success but more to the experience of ones own stream of inward life.

Rarely can students explain why they take German courses. They feel they should, it is always the feeling that comes first. And perhaps the most German question for them is 'warum'. It is not surprising to find young people standing in the subway during rushhour and reading Romantic poetry, Eichendorff or E. T. A. Hoffmann in German. These people who do not speak German are engaged with a foreign language without intentions to materialize their reading experience. They read German because they feel like it and enjoy it.

Of course, 'the century of the Japanese' demands its tribute. Tradition changes, the new industrial superpower has to care for international relations, there is a definite need for a workforce able to speak foreign languages. The big industrial concerns are financing newly planned business universities where the output of

managers who also speak foreign languages is guaranteed after a one-year crash program, and German has its place in it. German language institutes in Tokyo have never experienced before students lining up in early morning hours to be among the first hundreds on registration day. The enrollment for German courses in Technical Colleges has doubled overnight. Commercial language speaking movement has turned on. Such unexpected development is clearly dictated by the needs of todays' multifunctional society. Their rapidly changing values demand intellectually and socially a free access to teaching ardlearning a foreign language. Thus the role of German is about to come down from its cultural elevation within the German departments of the universities and will find a new and broader understanding.

This process of democratisation of cultural values for the benefit of all people seems to be a policy of the mass media. In regular daily broadcasts the government run television and radio stations, reaching the smallest and farthest village of the nation, appeal to the public with a variety of foreign educational language programs. The funds for these programs are distributed on the percentage of enrolled listeners and by checking the attendance on regularly held public discussion meetings in various cities. In this competition German shares an excellent second place together with French and behind English as front runner. Millions of people in Japan are now studying foreign languages by radio and television. Who would dare to think of a comparable exposure of the Japanese language in Germany as German in Japan has the privilege to experi-

ence and the people eager to learn it. And everybody knows that German is still taking advantage of the fact that Japanese convey by way of feeling their experience with a foreign language and their personal enrichment specifically with German thinking to all of their family. But since Japanese social structures are rapidly changing the German language in Japan too has to adjust to these changes and give up some of its traditional privileges.

Footnotes.

1 Roger Bersihand: Geschichte Japans von den Anfaergen bis zur Gegenwart. (Stuttgart: A. Kroener, Vol. 350, 1960), cf. p. 311

2 cf. ibd.. p. 312

3 cf. ibd. p. 324

4 cf. ibd. pp. 325, 359

5 Masami Yoshida: "Der erste Deutschunterricht in Japan", in Doitsu Bungaku, Die deutsche Literatur (Tokyo: Ikubunio publishers, Herbst 1971), pp.96-105.cf.p.104

6 cf. ibd. p. 105

7 cf. ibd. p. 104

8 cf. Bersihand pp. 339, 345, 331

9 cf. ibd. p. 350

10 cf. ibd. p. 363

11 cf. ibd. p. 359

12 cf. ibd. p. 359

13 Hans Schwalbe: Acht Gesichter Japans. Im Spiegel der Gegenwart (Tokyo: OAG, 1970), cf. p. 182

14 cf. ibd. p. 243

15 cf. ibd. p. 193, 195